

# ‘Make the Music with Your Mouth’: Sonic Subjectivity and Post-Modern Identity Formations in Beatboxing

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## Abstract

This paper investigates the possibilities of pleasure, sound, and the disruption of the iterations of identity in progressive time. How does sound reformulate how we see whiteness, heterosexuality, and female-bodied people? Beatboxing as a citational and intertextual form — phatic, rhythmic, sonorous, and lyrically side-steps some of the traps of rap music or other hip hop forms through its embodiment of sounds rather the logics of lyrics and traditional musical structure. In that way it remakes — queers — our alliances, allegiances, and sonic sensibilities.

## Sonic Acceptance: The beatbox cipher

I entered my first hip hop cipher using human beatboxing. At ten years old, I wasn't terribly witty or clever like my worldly thirteen year-old brother and male cousins, but I was obsessed with rap music and being a participant in rap music and hip hop culture. Every time I would try to rhyme, I messed up the cadence, flow, and tempo of the impromptu session. My “voice was too light” as Jay-Z would proclaim some 25 years later; my sense of rhythm — abysmal. It's a small wonder I went on to pursue a music career as a singer and an emcee, because I really had no audible prowess. But I loved making sounds, I loved music, and I loved what I heard foundational NYC human beatboxers Doug E. Fresh, Darren “Buff Love” Robinson aka “The Human Beatbox,” and Biz Markie sonically render with their mouths and a microphone. After my pitiful, short beatbox demonstration, I gained some respect and some inclusion into the exclusively male cipher on the southwest corner of 124<sup>th</sup> Street in Harlem, NY, USA. That sonic pass would make it possible for me to occupy active performance space usually relegated to boys and men, as women and girls were relegated to watchers and listeners. My newfound sonic dexterity transformed my subject position — from “girl,” who could be ignored and dismissed — to a b-girl with beatbox skills; someone invested in and competent at an aesthetic form valued by her peers.

I share that story as a bridge memory spanning space, time, sound, and embodiment in order to think about sonic subjectivity and possibility in the music-and sound-making of Say Wut?! (Ashley Moyer) and Lucky Monkey (Tiffany Ashfield), two of the beatboxers at the First Annual American Human Beatbox Festival, organized by beat rhymer Kid Lucky ([http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ru\\_9cU0opoQ](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ru_9cU0opoQ)), and held at La MaMa Experimental Theatre Club in New York City, May 15-19<sup>th</sup>, 2011. Say Wut?! and Lucky Monkey both performed at the “Women of the 5<sup>th</sup>; Element” night dedicated to female human beatboxers. Kid Lucky set aside the night to celebrate and highlight female talent often overlooked in beatboxing. The sonic subjectivity I’m evoking resonates with Margaret Walker’s argument in her review of Naomi Cummings’ book, *The Sonic Self: Musical Subjectivity and Signification*. Walker contends (<http://library.music.utoronto.ca/discourses-in-music/v4n1a5.html>) “we look for meaning in the reception or consumption of sounds or even the sounds themselves, rather than in the human actions and interactions that produce them” (2002). Walker’s statement could be read in two ways: one way posits that meaning is made solely through sound and its reception, not the bodies or relations that create them. Another reading points to the insufficiency of relying on sound alone without accounting for the human bodies that produce them and the social relations produced through the relationship of sound to bodies. My definition of sonic subjectivity extends on this second reading to think through the ways social categories and social relationships might be reconstituted through aural interventions. Sounding and resounding bodies and audiences can generate or reform the stability of racial, gender, and sexual identities, highlighting how these social positions are informed by tone, tenor, timbre, accent, inflection, rhythm, melody, and cadence. Sonic subjectivity indexes subject positions is rendered through and by sound; sonic subjectivity also plays with the subjectivity of identity and how its fluctuations are thrown into audible relief through sound.

## Beatboxing the body

When revisiting the short videos I made of Say Wut?! and Lucky Monkey’s performances, I noticed my pleasure and delight at the musical virtuosity of the beatboxers. Because human beatboxing resists the constraints of strict music formalism,<sup>[1]</sup> it allows for the creative interaction of the beatboxer and her audience. According to the construction paradigm of music cognition, “musical meaning rests, not in a series of sonic patterns, but in the human recognition and acceptance of a particular sonic series as music” (Walker 2000, 28). There is a tension between the formalist aesthetics of music theory and the relationship and aesthetics of performance and audience reception. Jonathan A. Neufield writing in response to Peter Kivy’s arguments regarding musical interpretation and performance in both *Music Alone* (1991) and *Authenticities*(1998) suggests “it is not only admitted that a number of visual, gestural, and contextual elements of the performance tell us immediately and viscerally about the work; they can also expand our understanding of the work. A wide variety of properties of the performance — sonic or otherwise — can aid us in refining the identification and

evaluations of the properties of the work itself” (“Musical Formalism and Political Performances,” 5). Neufield attends to the various investments and subjectivities of a reviewer, but also underscores how place and time nuance a reading of any performance — for instance, the reception and controversy of a performance of Wagner’s music in Israel where he is banned (2). Music performance, then, is not only about the semantic and logistic elements of musical and sonic aesthetics, but also includes the bodies that perform them, the place in which they are performed, the history of the genre, and the wide-ranging investments of the audience.

Beatboxing, like the other elements of hip hop,<sup>[2]</sup> is an art form influenced by multiply sound genealogies, including French troubadours, North Indian “vocal bols,” West African ritual music, jazz, blues, barbershop quartets, and Japanese technology (Roland drum machines) (Tyte and White Noise 2009; McCabe 2011). Beatboxing combines phatic, imitative, emotive, sonorous, and musical elements using throat, tongue, teeth, breath, stomach, mouth, lungs, cheeks, neck, fingers, and other embodied elements to create a sonic relational feedback loop with the listener. Beatboxing is a form of vocal percussion used to imitate the sound of drum machines and beat patterns using ones mouth, lips, tongue, voice, and throat (Tyte and White Noise, “Part 2: The Old Skool”). Human beatboxers and beatbox historians, TyTe and White Noise note three prominent styles of beatboxing: vocal percussion emulating percussive sounds, including drum beats; beatboxing which sounds like a ‘beat box’ or a drum machine and is associated with “urban styles”; and multivocalism, “a term used for artists who use beatboxing, vocal scratching, singing, MCing and poetry in their performances.”<sup>[3]</sup> Beatboxing has become a promiscuous form, incorporating as many genres as an artist or group can accommodate. Like the emcee and the DJ, the beatboxer can shine with the encouragement of the live audience, riffing off of the hoots, laughter, shouts, cries, exclamations, and moans of the audience. As Tok Thompson (2006) argues, beatboxing is outside of the record industry, often performed live at impromptu and scheduled performance spaces, and is a global performance genre due to the presence of the Internet, specifically, *YouTube* (171-173). Thompson asserts this globalization has delocated beatboxing from one locale (urban US cities associated with blackness) to many locales (178), inclusive of the originary hip hop spaces with which beatboxing is often associated. Thompson further states, “ [i]f before one could tell one’s nationality, perhaps ethnicity, perhaps even language, by hearing one’s folk music, with beatboxing, emergent vernacular forms no longer carry conspicuous signs of geography, and hence, ethnicity” (178). Thompson argues beatboxing renders geography, perhaps nation-states, along with ethnicity archaic. Conversations with beatboxers, vocal percussionists, and beat rhymers point to different evidence: many relish in the syntactic and aural distinctions influenced by language and region.<sup>[4]</sup> Rather than eschewing geographic, ethnic, linguistic, and other identitarian investments beatboxing enmeshes them, building on established sonic cartographies<sup>[5]</sup> while initiating new ones. How might we read and hear

beatboxing as not simply a shift from localized racial (or ethnic as Thompson writes) performances to globalized ones, but concurrently, as a sonic modality possessing the possibility of queering gender, race, sexuality, technology, and desire?

## Who Dat?: Say Wut?!, race, desire, and sound

Say Wut?! sauntered on the stage with all of the sultry femininity of a nightclub singer. Dressed in a form-fitting black cocktail dress, her bright red corkscrew curls peeking out from under her embroidered hat (cocked to the side), Say Wut?! signified as both an enigma and a siren. Her laconic stroll from backstage to stage left, while carrying a black mug filled with steaming tea, seemed to enthrall the audience as they responded with whistles and hoots. There was something about her affect — her confident nonchalance, her poise, her wowing us into respectful silence with her introductory song — that began to allay my fears about usurpation of Black and Brown female bodies missing from “The Women of the 5<sup>th</sup> Element” night. As Thompson (2011), Hoch (2006), and McCabe note, beatboxing as sonic practice and art resists the bounds of racialization and racial allegiance. Hoch, especially, underscores the limits of confining hip hop arts to Black American bodies, stating the “notion that hip-hop is solely and African American art form is erroneous [...] [i]t is certainly part of the African continuum, and if it were not for African American there would be no hip-hop, but hip-hop would not exist if were not for the polycultural social construct of New York City in the 1970s” (351). Hoch’s argument manages to both center and expand on African Americans’ contribution to hip hop culture. Hoch notes both the expansiveness of the African continuum (especially the Caribbean) and the polycultural locality of New York City with its queer, disco, funk, punk, Puerto Rican, Asian, and other influences. Even knowing Hoch to be correct and agreeing with him, I experienced reactionary anxiety regarding who gets praised and rewarded for performing hip hop art. I wondered why there weren’t Black and Brown female bodies scheduled to perform. I knew the multi-racial and multi-gender audience was there to celebrate women in beatboxing as they are often overlooked. Beatboxing, as well as other forms of hip hop and music-making in general, is rendered male. Organizer Kid Lucky felt strongly that women and girls, often more inventive and daring beatboxers in his view, are pushed to the side in a storm of machismo and masculinist bullying. He wanted the world to see and hear what he knew existed — a cadre of world-class female beatboxers. But on the other hand, I experienced concerns that women in beatboxing seemed to mean non-Black or Brown women and I questioned the political and representational effects of the lack of those bodies.<sup>[6]</sup>

These concerns did not prevent me from visually and sonically engaging with Say Wut?!, rather those apprehensions waited in uneasy abeyance while I experienced Say Wut?!’s visual presentation. Her zaftig beauty and cool demeanor and the audience’s reaction to her represent a tangle of auditory, biological, ontological, and sensate responses. Various audience members cue their attraction and desire through gasps, sensual murmurs, and furtive

conversation amplified by the deep darkness of the space. Finally, someone, bubbling over with enthusiasm, loudly shouts “DAMN!” to indicate his approval of her fineness. There’s a kind of visual dissonance indexed by her whiteness and her sensuality; her sensuality is not only for our passive consumption. Rather, her sexiness and the confidence of her walk, actively draw the eye and soon the ear of the audience to her. Then she begins to beatbox and it’s all over.<sup>[7]</sup> The transition from song to beatbox is almost cinematic. She inhales a deep breath, breaking the rapt silence her singing commanded. Two minutes into her 17-minute performance and she’s already seduced us visually, impressed us through her singing, and then she interrupts those gendered acts with smart, complex, skilled beatbox techniques often made synonymous with technology and masculinity.<sup>[8]</sup> Say Wut?! spits heavy bass beats, tinny high hat tones, and mimics scratching of records with rhythmic dexterity. She seamlessly transitions from hip hop beats to house ones and back, slipping in and out of beatboxing and multivocalism, demonstrating her musical knowledge and performance range.

Once we are under her visual spell, she pulls out a hat track, producing a harmonica. This dénouement is quite quotidian as it first appears Say Wut?! is adjusting her brassiere. Instead she notes, “Right here, in my boob [male voice offstage shouts: ‘Yuh’], I’ve got a harmonica [crowd laughs]” (12:09) (<http://youtu.be/gD5D2Y5Xs4A?t=12m9s>). Say Wut? smartly holds us in anticipation; she doesn’t play the harmonica at first. Instead, she constructs layered beats: a ticking “scratch” track,<sup>[9]</sup> a booming base downbeat, intermediate record scratching sounds, tongue clicks, and her own breathy harmonizing. She begins to wave the harmonica like a conductor’s baton, keeping time and rhythm and moving the harmonica inexorably closer to her performing mouth. She stares at the harmonica (all the while still beatboxing), her long eyelashes come into view. Her look is inscrutable and it’s hard to tell whether she views the harmonica as friend or foe (or friend and foe). I remember experiencing a frisson of nervousness for her: “Had she done this before? Is she unsure? Oh, please don’t let her fuck this up!”

The audience is deathly silent for the first time during Say Wut?!’s performance. There are no approving hoots or flirty shouts. She beatboxes breath into the first note of the harmonica as if testing its sound. There’s a shaky transition from her prolific beatboxing to the complex multivocalism she is attempting. Her voice seems loud and unsure in the silent black box theatre and the harmonica sounds crass and unrehearsed. Say Wut?! pulls both microphone and harmonica from her mouth for three seconds, a seemingly interminable amount of time. When she breathes life into the harmonica this time (14:05) (<http://youtu.be/gD5D2Y5Xs4A?t=14m5s>), the audience laughs and chuckles at her now-recognizable prolificness and her astounding audacity; we are relieved she was merely preparing us for her splendid display. The first “What?!” screamed by a female audience member punctuates the approval and incredulity at Say Wut?!’s sonic audacity. It also sonically and syntactically mimics her name and its accompanying punctuation. Her name anticipates the scrutiny and dismissal she may face based on the topographical: skin color,

gender, and beauty. But the audience is with her, our bond to her is one of theatrical methexis — we willingly participate in this ritual or sonic-becoming. Say Wut?!’s harmonic moment was a reconfiguring one: highlighting the musical dexterity of the beatboxer — her ear and voice are finely tuned — reformulated what is music and musical imagery. She breathes, the harmonica sounds, we respond with whoops and screams. Walker postulates “many music metaphors are movement metaphors...] (f)orming a hypothesis of musical meaning, not only of sound, but also of space, motion, and tactility” (34). She adds that thinking this way seems “illogical” but that this is also how musicians verbalize musical concepts (34). Say Wut?!’ performance was sonic, but it also *moved* the audience through a visual consumption to a sonic one. She brought took us on a journey, mixing visual, sonic, and tonal pleasure, confusing the ways “female” and “hip hop” are rendered. Say Wut?! uses her physical attractiveness to lure us in, but unlike a siren she does not dash us against rocks, rather she gifts us with multivocality that enhances our desire, our pleasure, and our sonic repertoire — she makes love to us through the musical and sonic movement, all with her voice, breath, tongue, a microphone, and a harmonica.



Say Wut?!’s gender presentation is the lure that disarms the audience both from potential overdetermined racialization of her white body and it makes the audience more receptive to her. Her presentation and her beatbox dexterity make a formative impression on her audience regardless of the level of erotic attachment, but I want underscore the visual presentation of a sexy, zaftig young white woman and beatbox virtuoso are at odds in the audience’s imagination.<sup>[10]</sup> Her physiology is a contradiction as she plays with our desire for both her

body's sensual potential and her body's actualization of mastery over our senses (sight, sound, desire to touch, etc.). Her sonic subjectivity manipulates and plays with the highly scripted gendered and racialized one she presents. Her gender presentation disrupts as it soothes, paving the way for our expectations about what a "hot girl" can do in hip hop art.

In *Queer Voices: Technologies, Vocalities, and the Musical Flaw* (2011), Freya Jarman-Ivens postulates in contrast to Connor's (2000) and in extension of Guarracino's (2006) work on gender and the voice that "the biology of the listener of the singer is something of a red herring; what is important in the ontology of the voice is its capacity always-already to detach the signifier of the vocal wave form from the signified identity of the voice's producer." This, she argues, "keep[s] open the possibility for multiple gender identities, at least until such time as identity is conferred upon the voice's producer by the listener" (3). This liberal and arguably liberatory reading operates to deconstruct the gender binary both at the level of male/female and cis/trans; it makes room for "multiple" and, perhaps, new gender identities. Jarman-Ivens does not explicitly think through the racial implications for the queered voice produced by this space of open possibility, but she draws attention to the "voice not only in terms of its production *by* the body, but its implications *for* the body — its production *of* bodies" (8). How might we employ this reading critically to the intersection of gender and race?

Queerness as I'm framing it here exposes and offers an alternative to the symbiotic structures of white supremacy, patriarchy, heteronormativity (and homonormativity), and unfettered capitalism. It is especially important to think through the ways heteronormativity and racism constitute one another. As Patricia Hill Collins (2005) clarifies, "the assumption that racism and heterosexism constitute two separate systems of oppression masks how each relies upon the other for meaning...[neither system...] makes sense without the other [they are] better viewed as sharing one history with similar yet disparate effects...differentiated by race, gender, sexuality, class, and nationality" (88). Reframing Jarman-Ivens' work regarding voice and gender to take Collin's analysis into consideration, might the voice producer's race also be a "red herring" that is reconfigured through the vocal performance and the interaction between the listener and the audience? Mark Anthony Neal, while discussing "white performances of black idioms," argues "for a separate category known as 'white chocolate'" — R&B and soul performers who "challenge[] essentialist arguments about who is *allowed* to sing black music."<sup>[11]</sup> Neal contends California-born soul-siren, Teena Marie (1956-2010) and British crooner Lewis Taylor (born circa 1960s-) each constitutes a different breed of white musician performing "so-called black style[s]" from earlier and contemporary minstrel and caricatured black music aesthetics. Neal frames his argument for Marie's and Lewis' affective black performances as one of sincerity in the vein of John L. Jackson, Jr's work. Johnson, according to Neal, "argues...sincerity presumes a liaison between subjects...[Questions of sincerity imply social interlocutors who presume one another's humanity, interiority, and subjectivity. It is a subject-subject interaction, not the subject-object model that

authenticity presumes — and to which critiques of authenticity implicitly reduce every racial exchange.”<sup>[12]</sup> Neal continues on with convincing portrait of Marie and Taylor’s sincere investment in black American (and other) music styles. While I concur with that argument, I am drawn to Johnson’s distinction between subject-subject and subject-object relations. Mainly, I take Johnson’s sincerity to indicate a relationship, an investment, in black music audiences (in this case) as well as in black music styles. To my mind, what makes Marie’s and Taylor’s music appealing to black audiences and those invested in black musical traditions, particularly Marie whose music is a staple in many black American households from the 1970s on, is her investment in black people and black aesthetics. Unlike other musicians who “try out” black styles because they are fun, trendy, or carry the gravitas of black “cool” (see Taylor Swift’s desire to make an hip hop album, Miley Cyrus, or Justin Beiber), Marie, in particular, wrote lyrics, lived a life, and made music that spoke to the experiences, heroes, and stylistic traditions of a black radical tradition.

Marie belongs to black radical tradition aesthetics in the mode of Fred Moten’s claim for “the material reproductivity of black performance and to claim for this reproductivity the status of an ontological condition.”<sup>[13]</sup> Blackness can be reproduced on and through the body, but Moten re-en-genders the maternal one who precedes black masculine performative mastery (24). But what is at stake when we position non-black bodies as embodying, not simply imitating, black radical tradition aesthetics? It is one thing for an artist to “sound black,” it is another for black audiences to have the cognitive dissonant response of being unable to see the performer who’s sonic tone resonates blackly even as the performer is un-black corporeally. Sound, flow, lyrical mastery, cadence, music history knowledge, affect and gesture, clothing style, personal relationships, vocal ability, and audience approval are some of the factors in this complex amalgam of racial dissonance and performance, especially in hip hop performance and culture. It’s a performance that cannot be seen as one, yet is known to be just that. As Moten professes, “*sound gives us back the visuality that ocularcentrism had repressed.*”<sup>[14]</sup> Visuality points to the ways vision is constructed variously — how we see, how we’re made to see, how we are allowed to see, and who we see seeing and unseeing (Hal Foster), this is quite a different use from Nicola Mirzoeff’s visuality, which has to do with “ a regime of visualizations, not images, as conjured by the autocratic leader, whether plantation overseer, the general, the colonial governor, the fascist dictator, or the present-day ‘authoritarian leader’” (2012/13, xxx); and in this modality we might be able to think about how the queer body, or rather white queer(ed) voice re-sounds the black radical aesthetic tradition. Moten’s intervention re-centers black maternal voices into a highly masculinist and masculinized tradition of black radicalism. If one can not wholly get behind Moten’s assertion of the ontology of black performance as a static ontological beginning, but rather as an affective ontological watershed in the process of subjectivity, queerness intervenes here as a fork in the road of historical and state mandated blackness, versus the performance and performative blackness which artists use as



tools of black liberation and black freedom. The black radical aesthetic tradition is also a subversive tool that seduces non-blacks and blacks away from the fantasy of white supremacy and white homonormativity with its “just like” both black and straight rhetoric of fascist sameness. As Lisa Duggan has written, “the new homonormativity [is] ...] a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions but upholds and sustains them” (2002: 175). Say Wut?! firmly falls into this iteration of black radical aesthetics which affirms the use of the tools of performative blackness by bodies of all racializations. [\[15\]](#)

## Lucky Monkey: Performing heterosexuality

Lucky Monkey and her husband, Fat Tony, offered the audience at the “Women of the 5<sup>th</sup> Element” performance a different intersubjective consideration. Unlike Say Wut?!, Monkey was dressed in a more typical hip hop performance garb: a retro cool Mario Brothers tee-shirt, jeans, and sneakers. Her shoulder-length brown hair was parted in the middle and her was unmarred by make-up. She looked like b-boy girl about to do her thing. Lucky Monkey’s sonic repertoire was oriented around hip hop beats, hip hop songs she sampled, dancehall, and drum-and-bass beats. [\[16\]](#)



She often used her hands to underscore the record-scratching sounds she made with her mouth, performing as both beatboxer and DJ. Her musical presence was energetic and upbeat and the audience hooted, hollered, and screamed their approval and support. When Fat Tony approached

the stage from the front row, the audience clapped, and waited to see what he would add to her already accomplished and electric performance. Fat Tony was taller and thinner in relation to Lucky Monkey. He was dressed similarly to Monkey, although he wore black combat boots instead of sneakers. His hair and facial hair were carefully styled and his “look” read as much more deliberate than Lucky Monkey’s. I recall feeling somewhat annoyed and perplexed and then curious when Monkey called Fat Tony up to perform with her. After all, wasn’t this *women* of the 5<sup>th</sup> Element, the 5<sup>th</sup> core unit, of hip hop? Had men called up their female friends, lovers, and artists to beatbox or perform with them on the other nights? These irritated contemplations muted and transformed when I saw the following bit: Lucky Monkey and Fat Tony move closer to one another and face one another, leaving the crowd looking at their profiles. As they approach Monkey drops her microphone and Tony raises his and they share one microphone. The way Fat Tony holds the microphone (to the side of both their mouths and out of sight from the audience), it appears as if they are sharing an open mouth kiss as they beatbox with and over one another. The moment is erotically charged not simply because of the position of their mouths and tongues in relation to each other, but also is relation to the phallic microphone that they share in this sonic threesome.<sup>[17]</sup> We in the audience laugh uproariously, scream out encouragement (“I love it!”) and incredulity (“Oh no he didn’t!”) — there is a sense of conviviality and fun in the theatre. Lucky Monkey and Fat Tony perform deftly and humorously. The two turn a potentially schlocky husband-wife heterosexual white domestic encounter — kissing — into a performative musical/sonic moment. Rather than being cute, they transfigure their romantic relationship into a musical one, forcing us to reimagine their public and private life as a consummate beatbox duo. As they shift tonality and timbre, as well as tempo and meter, to the two-step drum-and-bass sound, it further complicates the pleasantness of the encounter. Their dissonant resonance acts as a momentary disruption to the imagined scenes of offstage domestic bliss and easy collaboration. The physicality of the act — sharing breath, spittle, the buzzing of touching lips, the pressing of noses against the other’s face, all amplified by microphone — approximate and supersede the image of a kiss. Instead of a kiss, a semi-private act, this musical, open-mouthed kiss externalizes the internal body processes. The audience thrills at this audacity. I had never seen such a scene and was compelled by the cooperation taking place. Rather than beatbox battling, the only form of beatbox intersubjectivity with which I was familiar, the two collaborated in a way that subsumed neither, but riffed off their romantic collocation. As my choked out, laughing, “That is awesome!” expressed, there was a sense wonder and pause at the creativity and a feeling of freedom that emerged. I read the moment as a revising of heterosexual relations in which mutuality, rather than domination or equality, was at play. In this performance, they were “straight with a twist” as Calvin Thomas (2000) writes. Thomas describes the process of applying queer theory to straight subjects and/or “queer-savvy” straight theorists using not “to appropriate queer theory but to proliferate its findings and

insights” (3). Though a seemingly straight couple, I read their beatboxing duet as interrupting heteronormativity in the way their performance puts both bodies on display rather than repressing the male body in order to produce heteromascularity (Thomas 2000, 4).

When the two finally break apart and Fat Tony looks at Lucky Monkey with adoring sexy eyes, it was riveting. Fat Tony looked as if he wanted to make out with Monkey right there. Licking his lips with LL Cool J smoothness, he takes her head in his hand, the gesture communicating a kiss’ approximation. We, the mixed race, mostly male audience giggle, we titter, and finally the audience just lets out raucous laughter as the two perform a beatbox make out. Whether this performance was highly rehearsed and scripted, improvised, or a mixture of the two, the desire between the two (and holding forth from my camera angle, you can only see his desire, but you can *hear* both of theirs) is striking for the way it also complicates the embodied performance of heterosexuality. Their performance exposes white heterosexuality as a performance while they constantly sonically interrupt domestic bliss, make-out sessions, and the futurity of sexually coupling through their close, intimate beatbox duet.

Fred Maus investigates the gendered writing of musical theory and how the practice of listening is also gendered and codified in musical writing. He notes the writer controls the sexual pleasure of the listener as music is “pulsating rhythms, hypersensitive surfaces, and elaborate patterning of climaxes, it can give a particularly intense, concentrated, sensuous pleasure” (Maus “Masculine Discourse” 273). The music, he argues, initiates and controls the listener’s experience and poses a threat to rigid masculinity. As he argues, “[i]t’s one thing for a man to listen respectfully while someone holds forth, quite another [for a man] to get fucked” (274). Maus argues the music controls and fucks us. Just as there is an erotic charge produced through our fantasies of Say Wut?!, so is there a charge not just between Monkey and her man, but between them and us. We want to fuck, but we get fucked. Maus argues musical writing is a way to reverse listening as passive and feminine — to masculinize discourse in order to cover vulnerability and penetrability. We were listening *and* watching, our voyeuristic gaze is thoroughly supported at all levels of the social and therefore often occludes the possibilities of listener penetration. Saturated as we are in Moten’s “ocularcentric” mode, we might miss the potentiality of the aural. Since, unlike Maus’ example, this particular sonic moment is not made by either a man or a woman, but both, it makes fraught our own listener identity. The exchange between the two married beatboxers, on one level is voyeuristic as I described in my reading of the scene — it confirms our pleasure at a distance. On another level, it’s fraught for some in the audience who may be invested in heteronormative heterosexuality, interrupting our pleasure as it becomes difficult to settle on one erotic object because both are erotic objects — their sonic virtuosity makes that so and their conjoined musical experience makes it impossible to maintain rigid sexual identities based on a set idea of logical attachments.

# Conclusion: The Possibility of the Liminal: Sonic interruption, transformed bodies

Victor Turner argued the liminal “persons elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space” (Turner, “Liminality and Communitas” 95). Liminality, according to Turner, is indexed by or likened to “death...] the womb...] invisibility...] darkness...] bisexuality...] wilderness” (95) among other symbols. These terms Turner uses to define the liminal also conjure up negative (darkness) or frightening (death, wilderness) associations for many. Others (bisexuality, the womb) shift in affective impact depending on the context, but are often considered simply places of gestation to usher one from one stage to another; they are not seen as site of their own meaning when not producing. The liminal space was the stage at La Mama on that balmy May night. The stage space did, in fact, transform the listeners, and hopefully the performers. Perhaps the audience went expecting to see women perform in a certain way, to maybe reaffirm in some corporatist inclusive way that women and their voices matter. We were transformed: our musical expectations, our gender and sexual subjectivities were interrupted, if only momentarily, our racial expectations and subjectivities were reworked and complicated by the prowess of women whose profiles did not comfortably fit the idealized black performing hip hop body, even as they followed in a genealogy of black performance. In this way, this very seemingly heteronormative and black normative sonic space (not La MaMa, of course, but the sonic legacy of beatboxing) was turned on its metaphoric ear, making possible through sonorous performance a way to disrupt the seemingly endless, immutable, and regressive categories of race, gender, and sexuality, which constantly are reified as real, even as their status as categories is a *mélange* of historical, social, physiological, and temporal constructs. As I noted in this paper’s introduction, sounding and resounding bodies and audiences can generate or reform the stability of racial, gender, and sexual identities, highlighting how these social positions are informed by tone, tenor, timbre, accent, inflection, rhythm, melody, and cadence. Sonic subjectivity indexes subject positions is rendered through and by sound; sonic subjectivity also plays with the subjectivity of identity and how its fluctuations are thrown into audible relief through sound. This does not mean the material reality and impact of racial, gender, and sexual categories get tossed out or erased through beatboxing, but rather by giving us a sonic pause and throwing into relief our own seduction into the authoritative legitimacy race, gender, and sexuality as immutable, this particular beatbox performance exposed the limitations of such thinking. My own quite palpable suspicions surrounding white bodies and hip hop art indexed anxieties at the material level in which white bodies “sounding” black are often promoted and hailed as musical and sonic geniuses, while the black bodies originated the performances are lost to history and denied similar fame. By focusing on what the sonic and the visual created as an ensemble, other worlds were made possible in that space: we got to revel, laugh, enjoy, and temporarily join together in aural language that resisted the formal syntax of spoken

language. We got to be irreverent, flirty, silly, non-violent, and transformed without being erased by conservative or liberal means of white, male and/or heterosexual de-historicizing. Whiteness, heterosexuality, and maleness didn't stop being systems of interlocking power, but I saw and heard that the beatboxing space at La Mama that night could create a new, critical sonic atmosphere in which new types of bodily configurations, racial, gender, and sexual, could arise, take shape, abide, and flourish through the exchange between performer and listener.

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## Notes

1. Patrick McCreless gives a working definition of formalism as "the claim that the essence of any art resides in relationships of elements within an artistic work itself, not in relationships to anything outside that work. Recent historical accounts and reference works on aesthetics offer virtually the same definition." See: "Formalism, Fair and Foul," *The Music Issue*, *Nonsite.org*, Issue 8, (Winter 2012/2013): 6, accessed November 10, 2013, <http://nonsite.org/article/formalism-fair-and-foul> (<http://nonsite.org/article/formalism-fair-and-foul>).
2. As Danny Hoch writes in "Toward a Hip-Hop Aesthetic: A Manifesto for the Hip-Hop Arts Movement": "the consistent challenge has been to define not what hip-hop means as culture, but what hip-hop means as art — in fact, to make the case that hip hop *is* art" (2006, 349). Hoch delineates the aesthetics of four of hip hop elements: Graffiti, DJing, Rap, and B-Boying (Dance). Shannon McCabe (2011) notes hip hop has five elements: "dance (breaking, b-boying/b-girling, popping, locking), music (deejaying, beatboxing), poetics (emceeing, rapping), visual art (graffiti), and philosophy (knowledge, overstanding)" (95).
3. TyTe and White Noise, "Part 2: Old Skool: Introduction," *The Real History of Beatboxing: Part 2*, (September 29, 2009): np, accessed November 10, 2013, <http://www.humanbeatbox.com/forum/content.php?35-The-Real-History-of-Beatboxing-Part-2>.
4. Kid Lucky, via Skype, "Beatboxing and Beatrhyming," class presentation to "Hip Hop, Gender, and Sexuality," taught by Shanté Paradigm Smalls, Davidson College, Department of English, Davidson, NC, November 8, 2012.

5. For some recent work on sonic cartographies, see Walter S. Gershon, "Sonic Cartography: Mapping Space, Place, Race, and Identity in an Urban Middle School," *Taboo: The Journal of Culture and Education* 13.1 (2013) and Karen Tongson's book-length project, *Relocations: Queer Suburban Imaginaries* (New York: New York University Press, 2011).
6. There is much writing about the intersection of gender/sex and race in relation to Black women, most famously, *But Some of Us Are Brave: All the Women are White, All the Men are Black: Black Women's Studies* (New York: Feminist Press at CUNY, 1993). Current debates on Twitter have spurred hashtags like #solidarityisforwhitewomen (Mikki Kendall) and #blackpowerisforblackmen (Jamilah Lemieux), pointing to the ways Black women are still made invisible in gender and race politics. In recounting the great debates between black female and male scholars about the categories of "race" and "woman," Margaret Homans contends, "Although these different debates about difference took different aspects of the body as synecdoches for it, their historical coincidence produced a contested question: what meaning does the difference between those two debates about the body have — the former dominated by black men, the latter by white women — when the subject is the bodies of African American women?" (77). See: "'Racial Composition': Metaphor and the Body in the Writing of Race," *Female Subjects in Black and White*, eds. Elizabeth Abel, Barbara Christian, Helen Moglen (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997)
7. "Say Wut: American Human Beatbox Festival 2011," YouTube video, 17:02, posted by TheBeatboxqueen, May 21, 2011, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gD5D2Y5Xs4A>
8. Any Google search for beatboxers results in pages of links and images of male beatboxers around the globe. Sometime, Butterscotch (Antoinette Clinton) will appear on lists of American beatboxers. For more about women, technology, and hip hop, see Tricia Rose's chapter, "Soul Sonic Forces: Technology, Orality, and Black Cultural Practice in Rap Music," in *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1994).
9. Also referred to as a "click track," this is a metronome or other recording used to help musicians keep time during the recording or editing process.
10. Part of this this has to do with the way that whiteness, rhythm, sound, and dance has been set up as anti-thetical in the US. For more on this, see Thaddeus Russell's chapter "A Rhythmless Nation," in his book, *A Renegade History of the United States* (Free Press, 2010).
11. Mark Anthony Neal, "White Chocolate Soul: Teena Marie and Lewis Taylor," in *Listen Again: A Momentary History of Pop Music*, ed. Eric Weisbard (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007), 25-258.

12. John L. Jackson, Jr., *Real Black: Adventures un Racial Sincerity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 15, as quoted in Neal "White Chocolate," 258.

13. See: Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetic of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 18.

14. *Ibid*, 235.

15. For recent work on the uses of performative blackness in hip hop, see Nitasha Tamar Sharma's *Hip Hop Desis: South Asian Americans, Blackness, and a Global Racial Consciousness* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010) and Antonio Tiongson Jr.'s *Filipinos Represent: DJs, Racial Authenticity, and the Hip-Hop Nation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013).

16. "Lucky Monkey, Women of the 5<sup>th</sup> Element," American Human Beatbox Festival, YouTube, 0:41, posted by JustJessP, June 30, 2011.

17. For more on queering the phallus, see Jan Campell's chapter, "Queering the Phallus," in *Arguing with the Phallus: Feminist, Queer, and Postcolonial Theory: A Psychoanalytic Contribution* (London and New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000).